

Soldiers

Online

Return to Berlin

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

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Corbis

... and construction crews rebuild and renovate, remedying more than a half-century of neglect.



CW2 Tom Castle (left) and SFC Michael McDonald — two of the soldiers still serving in Berlin — greet a German Guard outside the U.S. Embassy.



A line of stones running through the pavement near the Reichstag is a constant reminder of where the wall once separated Berlin.

ON Nov. 9, 1989, 28 years after the city was cut in two by the infamous Berlin Wall, East German leaders announced the decision to open the border with the West, leading to the eventual reunification of Germany and the re-establishment of Berlin as the nation's capital.

Suddenly, anyone who wanted to visit or even relocate to the democratic nations of Europe could simply come to the border and request an exit visa.

TV and radio reports of the new policy sent thousands of East Berliners to the Wall's checkpoints to see if what they were hearing was true. Crowds grew so large that border guards couldn't process the paperwork. They simply opened the border and let the people walk through.

Workmen dismantled sections of the Wall from Nov. 14 to 21. And the

famed Brandenburg Gate — landmark dividing line between East and West Berlin, located on the communist East side since the Wall went up in August 1961 — officially opened on Dec. 22.

In a flash, years of tension, intrigue and conflict in the divided city gave way to exhilaration and renewed hope for the future, according to historians Robert Grathwol and Donita Moorhus

in their book, "American Forces in Berlin, 1945-1994."

TODAY, some of the most notable effects of the fall of communism and the subsequent German reunification continue to take place in Berlin. And, as it has done for more than a half-century, the Army is playing an important role in reshaping not only the future of Berlin, but of Germany.

■ U.S. Army Presence - Defense Attaché

COL Eric Hammersen, defense attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, is the first U.S. military attaché in the city since 1941. Earlier, the U.S. Embassy was located in East Germany.

With the transition of the seat of government from Bonn to Berlin the U.S. Embassy also relocated there, in July 1999. Hammersen arrived a month later.

In June the attaché office was still split between Berlin and Bonn, because 90 percent of the German Defense Ministry was still in Bonn. Some 30 U.S. active-duty military personnel from the joint services were assigned to Berlin, six of them soldiers.

"I consider it a great honor to be here at this time, when the seat of government moves back to Berlin and German armed forces are undergoing restructuring," said Hammersen, whose grandfather and daughter were both born in Berlin. "We understand what restructuring is about, and we pass on offers of assistance to German government officials."

As attaché, Hammersen is the military advisor to the U.S. ambassador to Germany and his consulates. He represents the secretary of defense, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

From the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, COL Jan Harpole secures agreements for U.S. participation in exercises like "Partnership for Peace."

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service secretaries, and others, to their German counterparts. He coordinates activities between the Army and the German Bundeswehr, and observes what's happening in Germany and reports back to the U.S. Defense Department.

He and his staff set up meetings for high-ranking visitors, taking care of aircraft clearances and arranging for note-takers to record meeting events. "If agreements are made at the highest levels, we facilitate the implementation of those agreements, too," Hammersen said.



COL Eric Hammersen is the first U.S. military attaché in Berlin since 1941.

When President Bill Clinton visited Berlin recently, "we were involved in making arrangements for Air Force One and supporting all the military personnel who came with him, he said.

"That visit was pretty significant," said CW2 Tom Castle, another member of the Defense Attaché Service. "Over a five-day period we had Clinton, the secretary of state, assistant secretary of state, deputy secretary of

defense, two assistant secretaries of defense, the commander in chief, Europe, and all of their generals and colonels here in Berlin."

"I do lots of coordination,"

Hammersen said. He and his staff arrange talks between U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command personnel in the United States and German army staffers. Recently, they also assisted in getting U.S. military aircraft to Berlin for the Berlin International Air Show.

USAREUR recently completed a signal exercise in Thuringia, a former East German state. "We had to coordinate with German authorities to allow the exercise to take place there, because it's outside our normal training areas," Hammersen said.

■ Berlin Bde. Deputy Commander

Dr. Stephen Bowman was deputy brigade commander of the U.S. Army Berlin Brigade in July 1990, eight months after the Wall fell. He retired from the Army in 1996 after serving as director of the U.S. Military History Institute, then received an offer to do military tours in Berlin.

In the summer of 1991, as the Allies were departing Berlin and throwing away valuable occupation memorabilia, Bowman met with members of a German historical society who wanted to establish an Allied museum in Berlin. It opened in June 1998.

"We were concerned that there'd be nothing of this history left," said Bowman, who married a Berliner in 1999. She'd taught Head Start to





Motorists and pedestrians (above) casually cross the once-formidable border at the Brandenburg Gate, which was far less accessible during the Cold War (right).

American soldiers and educated the children of U.S. general officers for 18 years.

“There’s no doubt when you walk down Unter den Linden to the Brandenburg Gate, where all the Eastern nations had their embassies, that we helped save Berlin,” said Bowman. As he spoke he stood in what was once the “death strip,” the area outside the Potsdamer Platz subway station, fronted by the Reichstag — Germany’s re-established seat of government — and the Brandenburg Gate.

The S-Bahn station at Unter den Linden, which closed when the Wall went up, today is an important stop. And the Potsdamer Platz station, a maze of construction, is to become an ultramodern subway station and shopping complex.

Today at the Brandenburg Gate people and cars come and go freely.



Before the Wall fell, it divided East and West Berlin. “The Wall curved out in front of the Brandenburg Gate, and the gate was on the communist side,” Bowman said.

The city’s transformation includes the restoration of the famed Adlon Hotel on Unter den Linden. Used as a hospital after the World War II battle for the Reichstag, the most exclusive hotel in all Berlin is once again open.

“It was like walking from color to black and white,” said Bowman of the differences he noted between “gray and dingy” East Berlin and vibrant West Berlin when he visited years earlier as a company commander.

Today, in a city that’s 40 percent covered by parks and lakes, “you can put all of Frankfurt, Stuttgart and Munich inside the city limits and still have room for Washington, D.C.,” said Bowman of the united Berlin that is home to 6 million people.

Teacher - JFK International School

Bill Kunzman, a friend of Bowman’s since the two were classmates at West Point, also teaches at the JFK school. Kunzman retired in 1995 as a colonel and TRADOC’s liaison officer to the French army.

“I was assigned to Germany for a

total of six years during my career,” Kunzman said. “But I always commanded air defense missile batteries in southern Germany. And, there were rules about commanders of those units coming to Berlin — we couldn’t.”

He visited Berlin for the first time in May 1989. Following his retirement, he went back to school to get his teaching certificate. “I knew I wanted to come back to Europe and could do so as a teacher. And I knew if I couldn’t return to Paris, Berlin was my second choice.

“Because I’d always enjoyed working with soldiers, I thought teaching would be for me,” Kunzman said. “I sent resumes to every school I could think of. I sent 30 letters and got 29 responses that said you had to be a teacher for two years first.

“I hadn’t taught for one day, other than as a student teacher,” he continued. “I was due to start my doctoral program on July 1. On June 30, I got a call from the JFK school, asking if I wanted to teach physics. “They said, ‘We know what you did in the Army,



Germany's Bundeswehr soldiers can also be seen exploring the city that previously had been off-limits to them.

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what you learned at West Point. That’s good enough for us.” Kunzman teaches physics at the school.

“A main reason we care about being here is that the schools are excellent. The government has made the JFK school the school for embassy children. And I teach the children of the ambassadors of Pakistan and India, among others,” Kunzman said.

Besides the excellent schools, “there’s so much history here, so much ambiance — you can ‘feel’ the city,” Kunzman said. “My wife is a spy-novel freak. The places we visit are places she reads about in her books.”

USAREUR Liaison Officer

COL Jan Harpole command’s the

U.S. Army, Europe, liaison office at the embassy. “We’re the only non-diplomatic U.S. forces’ element in Berlin,” said Harpole, who arrived in September 1999.

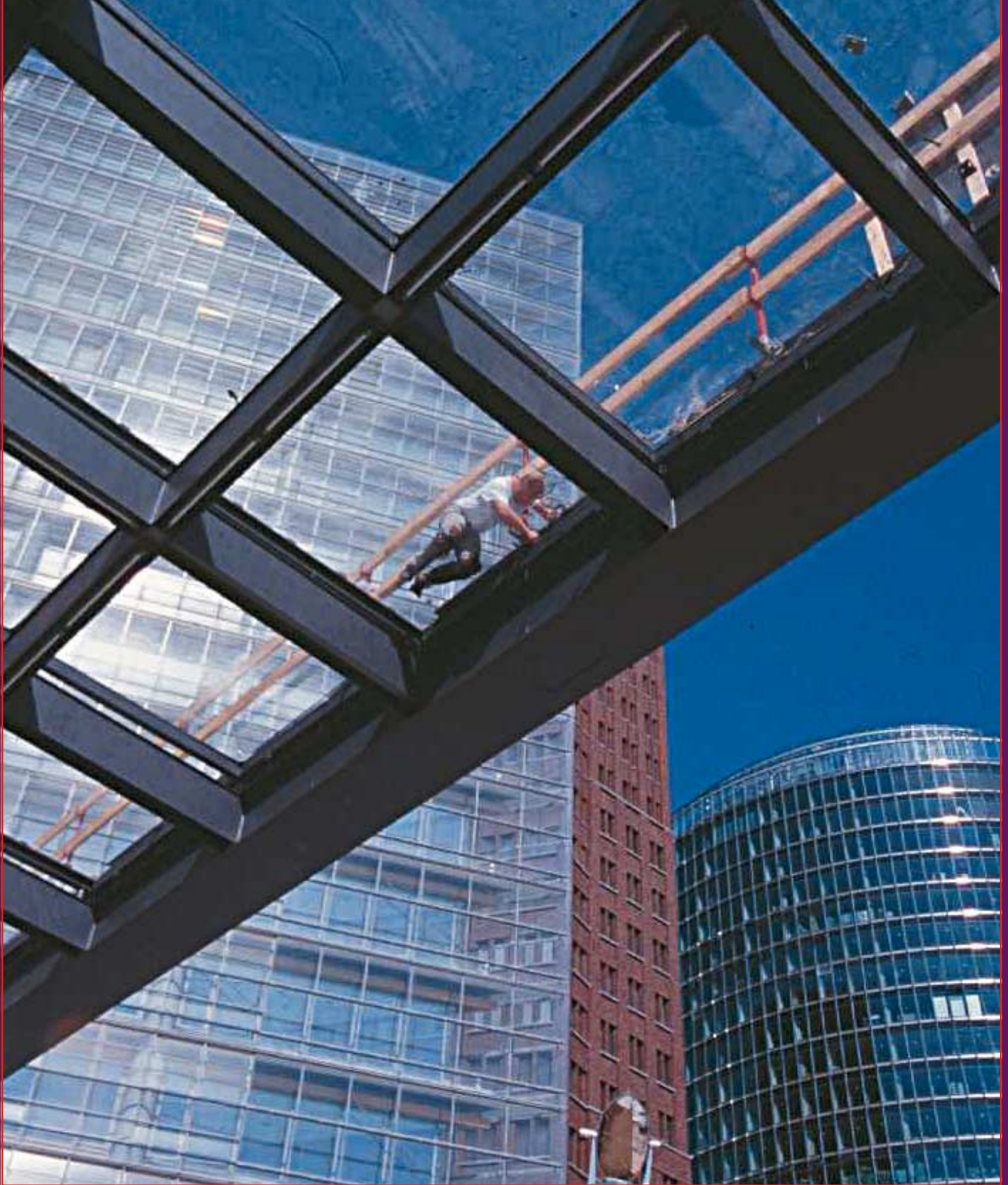
Harpole’s office provides the liaison between the USAREUR commanding general and the U.S. ambassador to Germany, and represents the U.S. forces to the German government.

“It’s surprising to me how well received I am in the local community,” said Harpole, who lives in the former East Zone and first came to Berlin in the mid-1970s, when he was assigned to a transportation unit that ran the “Duty Train” from Frankfurt to West Berlin. “I didn’t have security concerns, but administrative ones.”

As one of the few U.S. soldiers

living in Berlin he’s often a “guinea pig,” he said. “I’ve often had to prove to police that I don’t have to pay this tax or that fee, and that I can drive with a civilian registration under the Status of Forces Agreement,” Harpole said of his experiences dealing with German officials. “It’s allowed me to get to know the people and make friends. It’s been somewhat of an advertising campaign, too, to say, ‘yes, the U.S. Army is here,’ albeit in very small force. But we’re all part of NATO; it’s simply a process of education.

“What I hear over and over again — always from the easterners — is that in all the years the Soviets were here, they had no contact with them,” Harpole said. “The young Russian soldiers didn’t have hard currency and



Modern high-rise buildings and plenty of glass characterize what's soon to be the Potsdamer Platz subway station shopping area, once the last stop between East and West.

were always under strict military control. The higher-ranking officers just weren't interested in making friends with the East Berliners.

"Now that we're in what used to be East Germany, we're trying to increase the U.S. presence in the east,"

Harpole said. "Since we don't have any U.S. forces personnel stationed in the eastern part of Germany, we have to do other things to show how a U.S. force conducts itself in a democracy."

In June, the Army conducted the largest military exercise in the east,

with one battalion of U.S. soldiers in Thuringia — a wooded, mountainous region in central Germany near the Czech border, Harpole said.

"I was told several thousand people hiked up the Harz Mountains, where a 22nd Signal Bde. element was located



Major construction and renovation projects are focused on areas where the Wall once stood near Berlin's Spree River.

in the area of a former Soviet outpost," Harpole said. "They wanted to see what our soldiers do, and we don't prohibit them from seeing."

Some Bundeswehr soldiers participated, but the event was not a "Partnership for Peace" exercise.

More typically, Harpole coordinates with the USAREUR commander on land and facilities' use in Germany. "We don't own any land in Germany; it's provided for our use," he said. "There are thousands of areas where we need permission from local authorities to bring in food or store hazardous materials, as examples." In addition, certain treaties govern the introduction of new equipment or units into Germany.

"If one person is going to speak, or 500 people are going to be involved in a training exercise, we have to get an official agreement," Harpole said. "Since Poland and the Czech Republic have entered NATO, there's much more going on" — from another country's band playing, to a major training exercise in yet another former Eastern-Bloc nation.

Additionally, Harpole handles innumerable housekeeping issues, dealing with everything from space on which to conduct maneuvers to the

repair of buildings where U.S. soldiers live and work.

■ Legal Liaison Officer

MAJ Scott Frye, legal liaison officer at the U.S. Embassy, advises Harpole on the terms of treaties. "We have a staff of attorneys in Heidelberg, but I'm here because I speak German and have a background in international law," said Frye, who ensures U.S. officials understand the treaties.

"We still have Dutch, French, Belgian, British and Canadian forces in Germany," Frye said. "So, we routinely discuss environmental, training and management issues.

"We're here as guests of Ger-

many," said Frye, the only U.S. military lawyer in Berlin. "If there's a gray area, we form a front with our fellow 'sending states,'" Frye said. "It's not an adversarial position, but it strengthens our negotiating ability to have six sending states, because there are literally hundreds of agreements under two primary treaties: the NATO Status of Forces Agreement and a supplementary agreement that applies in Germany to the sending states."

■ The City Itself

Today, in the former East Zone, the sky is filled with giant cranes working to obliterate the last reminders of where the Wall butted against homes, and construction crews rebuild and renovate, remedying more than a half-century of neglect.

"You've got major restaurant and hotel chains in the former East Berlin," Hammersen said. "It's fascinating to see how cosmopolitan the city has

"It's fascinating to see how cosmopolitan the city has become. And only a few kilometers of Wall are left."

Berlin's massive construction and renovation projects include a major facelift for the historic Reichstag building that houses the united German government.





The Berliner Dom cathedral remains a popular attraction with visitors and residents.

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Massive projects include a several-city-block stretch of new government offices, several stories high, located across the street from the Reichstag, and luxury townhomes at Potsdamer Platz, area of the former “death strip.”

Harpole said the reported construction funding in Berlin is between \$12 billion and \$28 billion a year. “At that rate, it’s like watching someone paint a picture. Change occurs daily.

“The East is, in fact, changing at warp speed,” Harpole said. “Ten years from now, the most modern half of Berlin might be this half — the former East.”

The German government is putting huge resources into closing social and economic gaps, Hammersen said. But unemployment in the East is still significantly higher than in the West.

“It breeds contempt,” said retired Air Force Master Sgt. Robert Jumper, who was an air traffic controller at Tempelhof Airport when the Allies were departing Berlin. After retirement

he found a job at the city’s main commercial airport, Tegel International.

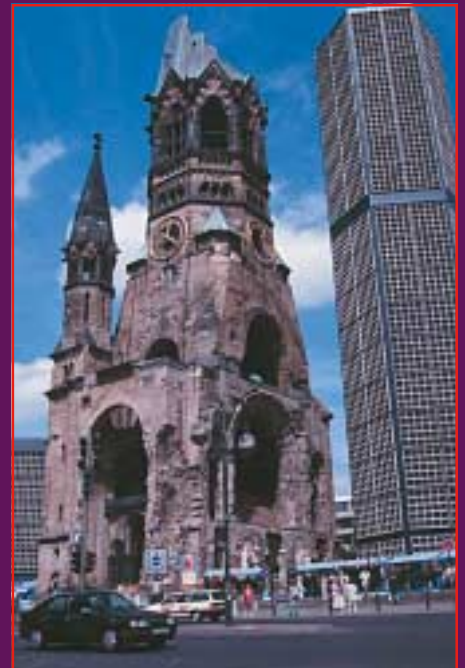
Jumper said most of the unemployment is in the eastern sector of Berlin and the former East Germany, where many people are not qualified for jobs because they didn’t have the same educational opportunities as their counterparts in the West.

The crime rate is high, too, he said. “When the Wall came down, the city picked up more than 2 million people. The bad came in with the good, among them Russian and East German Mafia.”

Also, the cost of living is extremely high, Jumper said. When the Wall fell, caps on rent went away. And when the capital moved to Berlin, property values soared.

Other issues include traffic congestion and a shortage of housing, Harpole said. “But, frankly, I find the city less congested than other major cities. Berlin is still a city with wide roads and lots of parking.”

“But integrating citizens from the former East and West Germany is still a problem,” Harpole added. Ten years



Berlin’s Gedachtniskirche, a landmark in the former Western Zone, known to Americans as the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church, suffered heavy damage in World War II, but has been left as a reminder of the devastation of war.

Ten years after the fall of the Wall, "You're just now seeing major migration. There was a tremendous amount of inertia that kept the eastern half in the east and the western half in the west; it's slightly less expensive to live in the eastern part of the city, for one thing. Additionally, the stores are open longer in the east, until 9 or 10 p.m."

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For U.S. military personnel living in the city, former Berlin Brigade housing is convenient, affordable and very nice, said Castle, who lives in a single-family home with his wife and children.

"Being at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin is a luxury assignment," added SFC Michael McDonald, Army



A preserved remnant of the Berlin Wall, painted by local artists, stands at the construction site near Potsdamer Platz.



Local musicians play at a subway entrance on the renowned shopping strip, the Kurfurstendamm.

operations NCO at the embassy. "We're five hours from the nearest military support in Vilseck, Germany. Many places we go — like Mongolia or Kazakhstan, we have to fly to another country for support, because there's none on the entire continent."

Today, U.S. personnel most affected by lack of support facilities in Berlin are most likely retirees, said Bowman. The only military service for ex-military personnel is a retiree mailroom

at the American Consulate. And the closest medical facility and post exchange are five hours away.

"It's all new now," said Jumper. "Before, we had the camaraderie that grew from the situation of the time. Now, we have to assimilate into the culture more. Every day is a learning, growing experience." □